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THE CHURCH OF
ST. MARY REDCLIFFE,
BRISTOL.

A.D. 1890.

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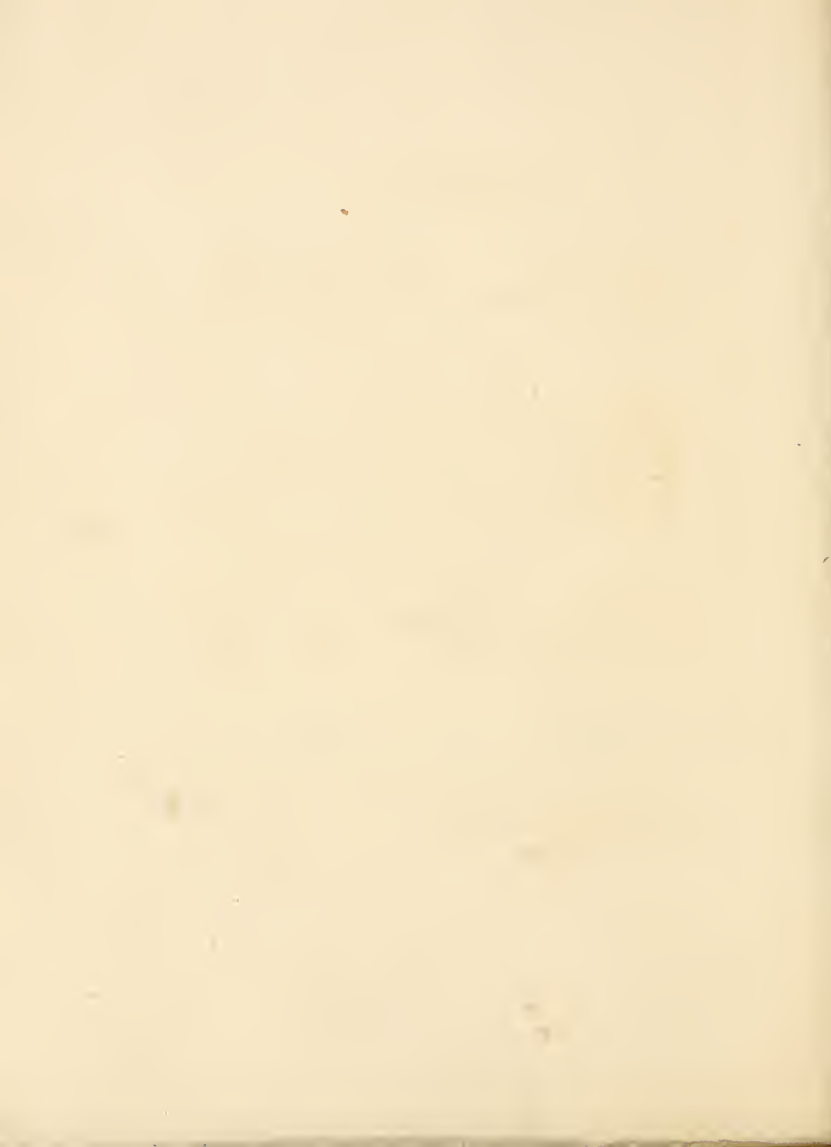
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Church of St. Mary Redcliffe.



QUEEN Elizabeth on her visit to Bristol in 1574, pronounced Redcliffe "one of the most famous, absolute, fairest and goodliest parish churches in England," an estimate of its superiority which few will dispute. Why the magnitude and beauty of the edifice did not cause it to be raised to the dignity of a cathedral, instead of the neighbouring house of Augustinian Canons, is answered by the quaint old Fuller, who says that this church "was not sufficiently accommodated like St. Augustine's with public buildings about it for a dean or chapter." He characteristically adds that "as the town of Hague in Holland would never be built about, as accounting it more credit to be the biggest of villages in Europe, than a lesser city, so Redcliffe Church esteemeth it a

greater grace to lead the van of all parochial, than to follow in the rear after many cathedral churches in England.”

The origin of the name “Redcliffe” will be at once explained by entry into the Quakers’ Burial Ground, which lies at the end of Jones’ Lane, opposite the western front of the church, where on the northern side the bare red sandstone rises high above the green turf just as it did centuries ago. Excavated in this rock is a veritable fourteenth century hermit’s cell, with a Pointed doorway and rude sedilia, the construction of which chamber shows that this part of the cliff has remained unmutilated from the time that the anchorite who first occupied it retired from the hurrying life of the world. The founder of the cell was Thomas, 8th Lord Berkeley, who appointed (A.D. 1346) John Sparkes as his bedesman. The Berkeleys were lords of Bedminster and Redcliffe, and as such there can be no doubt that they erected the thirteenth century church of St. Mary’s, some valuable remains of which are incorporated in the present fifteenth century structure. In the wall of the south aisle of the church are monumental recesses, similar in character to the Berkeley tombs in the Cathedral, the stellated arches enshrining

which are known as Berkeley Arches. In the absence of historical record of the early Church, these arches may be assumed to be evidence of the connection of the Berkeleys with the fabric; and the existence of a mailed effigy in the north transept, said to be that of one of the Knights of Berkeley, strengthens this conclusion. There are evidences, both documentary and constructive, of a Norman Church on this site, but we need not here enter into the subject. The Early English or thirteenth century remains may still, to a considerable extent, be traced by a careful eye, the lower stage of the tower and the inner north porch, with their arcading, being manifestly of this period. The local histories state that Simon de Burton, several times mayor of Bristol, began to build Redcliffe Church in 1294. A church certainly existed here a century earlier than this, and it is possible that the Decorated outer porch, which is about the time of Simon de Burton, may be assigned to his munificence, the Manor of Redcliffe having at that period been alienated from the Berkeleys.

In the reign of Edward III., just as Decorated architecture was passing into Perpendicular, the

thirteenth century Church appears to have been to a great extent demolished to provide for a new structure. The builders began with the south transept, which belongs to the reigns of Edward II. and Edward III. The tall south window, the finest window in the church, agrees in date with Abbot Knowles' windows in the Cathedral, or the time of Edward II. (murdered in 1326). The windows of the clerestory, with their rims of quatrefoils, are somewhat later, and belong to the Decorated period, as do also the piers, arcade, and groining of the same transept. The south porch is also of this date. Then, at the time (c. 1367) when the nave of Winchester Cathedral was being rebuilt by William of Wykeham, who was (A.D. 1361) a prebendary of Redcliffe, came the building of all the other aisles.

About the middle of the fifteenth century, William Canynges the younger, transformed the Church into the Perpendicular style (a style that is detested by Mr. Ruskin, but is dignified by St. Mary Redcliffe), raising the clerestory throughout, vaulting it with exquisite lierne groining, and glazing its windows, finishing the North transept in imitation of the South. In this church, remarks

Archdeacon Norris "all the deep shadows are below, and the highest story is full of light. It is not so in our Cathedral; there the chief light falls on the pavement, and the vault is shadowy. So it is in Westminster Abbey." The strong contrasts of light and shadow here contribute much to the impressiveness and mysterious beauty of the building. The fifteenth century builders lifted the vault, glazing the whole space between buttress and buttress. The work of the younger Canynges is precisely that portion which has its external walls *panelled*. The clerestory of nave, chancel and north transept are panelled, and the windows of these portions have uniform tracery, but the clerestory windows of the south transept are wholly different, showing difference of date and builder. The Lady Chapel at the extreme east was being constructed in 1386.

The ground plan is a cross within a cross, the outer lines being formed by the walls, and the inner by the ranges of clustered columns, which follow not only the course of the nave, but likewise the transept and chancel. The double aisles to the transepts are a very uncommon arrangement, and give the idea, when viewed from beneath either

of the tall windows of these stately wings, of one spacious church intersecting another at right angles, the four tall central arches apparently giving support to an external or central tower, which was in fact their intention. The fluted columns, bounding majestically upward, and rami-fying into the symmetrical tracery of the vaulted roof of the tripled aisles, foliate at the points of junction into literally a thousand forms. There are in fact 1,185 bosses, mostly of leafage and flowers, carved with sprightly fancy, and no two alike.

The special features of the exterior of the church are the magnificent but somewhat meretricious north porch and the yet more noble tower. But from these the eye wanders off towards the fabric as a whole, the balanced proportion of its members and its sustained grandeur captivating the attention like a magnificent piece of sculpture. This, in fact, the structure is, being a fretted mass from end to end.

Throughout the late restoration, which has cost over £40,000, there has been an honourable endeavour to bring back to view the exact structure that existed in the fifteenth century. The rebuilding

of the spire is so successful a work that it almost reconciles us to the absence of a central tower.

The total length of the church externally is 250 feet; height of tower, 110 feet; of spire, 151 feet; total of tower, cap and finial, 267 feet from pavement.

Before leaving the stately pile, the visitor will ascend the staircase in the hexagonal north porch to the room with the stone grilled windows at the crest, where lie the mouldering chests which once supplied the Rowley Poems, or their idea, to Chatterton. Boswell tells of a visit he made to this muniment room with his distinguished chief—where George Calcott, a boon companion of the poet, and a profound disbeliever in his Rowleian genius, demonstrated the authenticity of the poems by pointing out the chests where they were found(?). That Rowley and Chatterton are one and the same has been proved; but in days when identity is established in a certain order of minds between Bacon and Shakespeare, a division of the former two may still be attempted. Thomas Chatterton was born on the twentieth of November, 1752. It seems impossible to state with confidence whether he first saw the light at the

Pile Street School-house opposite his monument in Redcliffe Churchyard, or on Redcliffe Hill. His birth occurred three months after his father's death, an event that entailed the removal of the widow to fresh lodgings, in order to make room for a successor to her husband in the mastership of the school. Whether the removal took place before her confinement is not certain, but it is certain that at an early age the boy-poet was among the humble scholars of the same school. A visitor to the Church, the shrine and inspiration of young Rowley's genius, may yet see the school-room and master's house attached to the same, in like condition as when the Chattertons were in possession, the name of the father appearing among the list of schoolmasters on a board affixed within the school. Chatterton's boyhood was spent beneath the shadow of the magnificent fane whose influence inspired his imagination and mediævalised his spirit. As has been many times told, the boy-poet went to London to seek his livelihood by writing for journals and magazines. He failed in his aim, and to save dying for want of bread, he finished his course by his own hand. On the twenty-fourth of August, 1770, his land-

lady in Grove Street, Holborn, begged him to dine with her. He declined with customary hauteur of manner, alleging that he was not hungry. Shortly afterwards he left the house. He was heard to return—to enter his room—to lock the door. The next morning he was missed at his usual hour of appearance, and no sound was heard within his room. The door was broken open, and he was found stretched upon his bed, cold and stiff, a victim to despair, and self-destroyed by poison.

Nearly opposite the south transept of the Church, a little within the lower wall of the graveyard, is a tombstone inscribed with the names of Chatterton's parents and some of his near relatives. There is a tradition that the poet was secretly brought from London, and interred in the family grave. But as the primary evidence of the fact depends upon the testimony of a single person, it seems hardly of due authenticity, though one might wish it to be true. Mr. Le Grice, writing in the *Gentleman's Magazine* (August, 1838), in referring to this story, declares it to be "perfectly absurd." "His remains" he says, "were deposited in a pit

which admitted of many bodies, prepared for those who died in the Workhouse of St. Andrew's, Holborn. The admittance for the corpse was by a door, like a horizontal cellar-door, so it was pointed out to me many years ago. I wished to stand on his grave, the precise spot. 'That,' said the sexton, 'cannot be marked.'"

In this Church were married the poets Southey and Coleridge.



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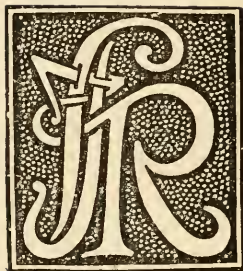
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